



**UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION 8**

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Ref: 8EPR-N

Mark Stiles, Forest Supervisor
San Juan National Forest
San Juan Public Lands Center
15 Burnett Court
Durango, CO 81301

RE: Durango Mountain Resort
Improvement Plan FEIS
CEQ#: 20080362

Dear Mr. Torres:

Consistent with our responsibilities and authorities under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act, the Region 8 office of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has reviewed the Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the U.S. Forest Service's (USFS) Durango Mountain Resort (DMR) Improvement Plan. With this proposal, the USFS proposes a series of improvements to the recreation experience by addressing issues related to the lift and terrain network, snowmaking coverage, guest services facilities and on-mountain maintenance infrastructure.

The USFS proposes to upgrade DMR within the existing special Use Permit area by replacing existing lifts with higher capacity lifts, adding new lifts, developing up to 20 new trails and a new tree-skiing area, improving trails and creating a dedicated teaching area at the top of the Twilight lift. Snowmobiling opportunities would be improved through trail rerouting and a developed parking/staging trailhead, snowmaking coverage would be expanded by 115 acres, and two on-mountain restaurants would be expanded and a third new restaurant would be constructed at the top of the Twilight lift. The proposal also includes expanding the existing mid-mountain maintenance facility, adding new recreational trails, and constructing a new trailhead facility with parking and restrooms on the east side of Highway 550. DMR is located on the San Juan National Forest in La Plata and San Juan County, CO.

EPA commends the Forest Service's decision to modify the Selected Alternative to not include the Ice Creek pod and associated components such as the Ice Creek lift, Ice Creek trails, top terminal access road, and the western portion of the realignment of the snowmobile bypass route at this time. As noted in the Record of Decision, the Ice Creek pod poses the most significant environmental concerns of the overall DMR Improvement Plan (page 6). The Forest

Service's deferral of a decision on the Ice Creek pod will allow DMR time to explore additional options to achieving the purpose and need that may be environmentally preferable to the proposed action.

In general, upon review of the Response to Comments and the ROD, EPA remains concerned with the proposed action's impact on lynx habitat, impacts to wetlands and water quality, and the lack of information to support the stated deficiencies in skier terrain and existing facilities. EPA continues to believe that the EIS does not fully develop the need for expanding the developed footprint of the resort with the new lift and pod at Ice Creek. This area provides winter foraging and other habitat for the Canada lynx, which is a listed threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. Furthermore, developing Ice Creek pod could result in adverse impacts to water quantity and quality. While EPA appreciates the Forest Service's responsiveness to our concerns, in deferring a decision on developing the Ice Creek pod, we note that the ROD states that "Ice Creek pod is an approvable project" (page 6).

EPA also remains concerned about the conversion of forested wetland type to emergent wetland type. In response No. 4.2, the Forest Service states that adequate habitat values and hydrologic functions will remain. Considering the total on-site palustrine forested wetlands is 5.1 acres and the conversion of 0.5 acres is approximately 10 percent of the resource, EPA believes this is a significant impact to this wetland type in the ski area boundary. Accordingly, we recommend that the Forest Service require mitigation for loss of forested wetland type within the Durango Mountain Resort pursuant to the Section 404 permit requirements and the Wetlands Protection Executive Order 11990.

Pursuant to the Section 404(b)(1) Guidelines, all direct, indirect, and cumulative adverse impacts to aquatic resources, including wetlands, must be disclosed and evaluated under one permit application for a determination of compliance with these regulations. The Corps of Engineers must evaluate adverse impacts and consider compensatory mitigation projects based on site-specific project conditions. EPA will recommend that the applicant mitigate for all unavoidable project impacts including loss of wetland habitat functions as part of our 404 pre-application and permit review.

EPA appreciates the opportunity to provide comments at this stage of the project. If you would like to discuss these comments, or any other issues related to our review of the FEIS, please contact Jody Ostendorf at 303-312-7814. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

/s/ Dana B. Allen for

Larry Svoboda
Director, NEPA Program
Office of Ecosystems Protection and Remediation

